

Emerson and the Idea of Nature

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Emerson and the Idea of Nature

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Contents

1. Introduction
2. Coleridge and natura naturans
3. Emerson and nature
4. Nature and man
5. Concluding remarks

1. Introduction

Sacvan Bercovitch says in *Puritan Origins of the American Self*: “the Greeks deified nature, Christians craved a heaven out of it, and modern man would ‘marry mind to Nature.’”¹⁾

1) Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1975), pp. 159-60.

2) *Nature* was published in 1836 and in 1844 “Nature” in *Essays: Second Series* appeared. Emerson defines nature in the Introduction to *Nature*:

Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE. In enumerating the values of nature and casting up their sum, I shall use the word in both senses; – in its common and in its philosophical import. In inquiries so general as our present one, the inaccuracy is not material; no confusion of thoughts will occur. [emphases added.] (p.8)

He says all that is distinguished as NOT ME must be regarded as nature. But we cannot assert that his point of view is rigorously objective like that of the scientist.

Unless otherwise specified, all quotations from Emerson’s works are to *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte, The Library of America (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1983). The number of the pages is to be placed in brackets.

referring to Ralph Waldo Emerson's (1803-82) idea. In considering the idea of Nature, we can immediately become aware of the distinction between the two attitudes towards nature: the objective point of view and the subjective one. It is apparent that Emerson's idea of nature belongs to the latter category,³⁾ as he never takes nature for something separated from man, nor does he take it for the subject of natural science, nor the rigid data.

For Emerson, nature is indispensable to the soul of man. We cannot neglect the fact that his idea of nature is greatly influenced by English Romanticism, though it is said that "Emerson's encounter with those two Englishmen [Wordsworth and Coleridge] proved disappointing"³⁾ on his travel to Europe. In this paper I would like to examine the essence of Emerson's idea of nature while making reference to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's (1772-1834) idea of *natura naturans*.

2. Coleridge and *natura naturans*

Nature was once grasped as a stable norm to follow, but its attribute of instability was given great importance in the eighteenth century. Basil Willey says in *Eighteenth-Century Background*:

'Nature' may be conceived rationally or emotionally. Indeed the history of the idea in the eighteenth century can be described in the most general terms as its development from a rational into an emotional principle. Nature and Reason are normally associated in the earlier part of the century, Nature and Feeling in the later. This change is associated with the growth of the cult of sensibility, the substitution of 'je sens, donc je suis' for 'cogito, ergo sum,' the increasing value attributed to impulse and spontaneity, and the decreasing importance attached to pure reason.⁴⁾

We can acknowledge that it is in the eighteenth century that the turning point of the idea of nature came.

When studying the idea of nature, we can find one of the keys in two concepts: *natura*

3) *The Portable Emerson*, ed. Carl Bode, The Viking Portable Library (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981), p. xiv. ("Introduction" by Carl Bode)

4) Basil Willey, *The Eighteenth-Century Background* (1940; Peregrine ed. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1962), p. 198.

naturans and natura naturata. They can be interpreted as God (Creator) and all things created by Him. Both human beings and the natural world surrounding us are included in natura naturata, according to this interpretation. But Coleridge takes the concept in another way.

In his essay, "On Poesy or Art" (about 1818), after Coleridge states that the task of the artist is to imitate nature, he clarifies his interpretation of the two concepts:

If the artist copies the mere nature, the *natura naturata*, what idle rivalry! If he proceeds only from a given form, which is supposed to answer to the notion of beauty, what an emptiness, what an unreality there always is in his productions, as in Cipriani's pictures! Believe me, you must master the essence, the *natura naturans*, which presupposes a bond between nature in the higher sense and the soul of man.⁵⁾

Here natura naturans and natura naturata are regarded as the essence of nature and its form. And Coleridge sets a higher value upon the former. He emphasizes the importance of perceiving the essence, natura naturans and of inspiring the essence into the work of the artist:

The artist must imitate that which is within the thing, that which is active through form and figure, and discourses to us by symbols — the *Natur-geist*, or spirit of nature, . . . (*Ibid.*, p.259)

As Coleridge makes much of the essence of nature, *Natur-geist*, Emerson, too, refers to the concept of natura naturans in his essay, "Nature" carried in *Essays: Second Series* (1844):

. . . let us not longer omit our homage to the Efficient Nature, *natura naturans*, the quick cause, before which all forms flee as the driven snows, itself secret, its works driven before it in flocks and multitudes. . . and in undescribable variety. It publishes itself in creatures, reaching from particles and spicula, through transformation on transformation to the highest symmetries, arriving at consummate results without a

5) S. T. Coleridge, "On Poesy or Art" in *Biographia Literaria with his Aesthetical Essays*, ed. J. Shawcross (London: Oxford U.P., 1907), II, 257.

shock or a leap. (p. 546)

While Coleridge regards *natura naturans* as the essence of nature, Emerson takes it for one of the secrets of nature. The latter says: “motion or change, and identity or rest, are the first and second secrets of nature: Motion [*natura naturans*] and Rest [*natura naturata*]” (*Ibid.*, p. 547). It seems that the concept of *natura naturans* is not given the most important role in Emerson’s idea of nature. Then what does he think is the essence of nature?

3. Emerson and nature

It may well be said that Emerson’s aim and end consists in the amelioration of man’s relation to nature:

At present, man applies to nature but half his force. He works on the world with his understanding alone. He lives in it, and masters it by a penny-wisdom; and he that works most in it, is but a half-man, and whilst his arms are strong and his digestion good, his mind is imbruted, and he is a selfish savage. His relation to nature, his power over it, is through the understanding; . . . (*Nature*, p. 46)

At this stage, man’s relation to nature is superficial, and Emerson thinks man lives and works, having nothing to do with the essence of nature. Man’s relation to nature is still incomplete, because he sees the world only through his understanding. Emerson affirms that we cannot reach the essence of nature through our understanding. It is reason that clears the way for the pursuit of the essence of nature:

Until this higher agency intervened, the animal eye sees, with wonderful accuracy, sharp outlines and colored surfaces. When the eye of Reason opens, to outline and surface are at once added, grace and expression. . . . If the Reason be stimulated to more earnest vision, outlines and surfaces become transparent, and are no longer seen; causes and spirits are seen through them. The moments of life are these delicious awakenings of the higher powers, . . . (*Ibid.*, p. 33)

It can be said that the essence of nature is perceived by our reason.

Each creature is only a modification of the other; the likeness in them is more than the difference, and their radical law is one and the same. A rule of one art, or a law of one organization, holds true throughout nature. So intimate is this Unity, that, it is easily seen, it lies under the undermost garment of nature, and betrays its source in Universal Spirit. (*Ibid.*, p. 30)

The fundamentals, which are common to all created things and whose fountainhead is Universal Spirit, are nothing less than the essence of nature. Though Emerson's interpretation of *natura naturans* differs from that of Coleridge, the former's idea of essence of nature shares something in common with the latter's idea of *Natur-geist*. Emerson's idea of the essence of nature underlies his idea of the Over-soul:

. . . that great nature in which we rest, as the earth lies in the soft arms of the atmosphere; that Unity, that Over-soul, within which every man's particular being is contained and made one with all other; . . . Meantime within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE. (*The Over-Soul*, pp. 385-86)

While in *The Symposium* and *The Divine Comedy*, Plato (427? - 347? B. C. ; Emerson writes an essay on Plato.) and Dante (Alighieri, 1265 - 1321) pursue the absolute and eternal through the act of ascending to heaven, Emerson turns his eyes to the natural world surrounding us to perceive the universal essence of nature:

In the woods, we return to reason and faith. . . . Standing on the bare ground, — my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, — all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. (*Nature*, p. 10)

Emerson relates the pursuit of the essence of nature through reason to the natural world, not to society. We can acknowledge what Perry Miller says in *Nature's Nation*: "[Emerson] could

never successfully resolve within himself the debate between Nature and civilization.”⁶⁾

Through the existence of the natural world, nature, Emerson can establish man's relation to the essence of nature. This brings forth Emerson's idea that "Nature is the symbol of spirit" (*Nature*, p. 20).

The world is emblematic. Parts of speech are metaphors, because the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind. The laws of moral nature answer to those of matter as face to face in a glass. . . .

This relation between the mind and matter is not fancied by some poet, but stands in the will of God, and so is free to be known by all men. It appears to men, or it does not appear. (*Ibid.*, p. 24)

When we think of Emerson's idea of nature, we cannot separate it from the human mind. Emerson faces nature without any prejudice.

4. Nature and man

Like Emerson, Henry David Thoreau (1817-62) accepts nature, the natural world surrounding us, as what it is. He says: "from the forest and wilderness come the tonics and barks which brace mankind. . . . How near to good is what is *wild*!"⁷⁾ Both Emerson and Thoreau regard nature as "the source of vigor, inspiration, and strength."⁸⁾ As Roderick Nash points out, they play an important role in the historical process of wilderness appreciation. He says: "Puritans feared the innate sinfulness of human nature would run rampant if left to itself in the moral vacuum of wilderness" (*Ibid.*, p. 86). Nash asserts that Emerson and Thoreau break down the Puritan's biased idea of wilderness.

Nash points out the gap between the Puritans and Emerson. Emerson himself shows his indebtedness to Emanuel Swedenborg (1688-1772) in *The American Scholar*: "[Swedenborg] saw and showed the connection between nature and the affections of the soul" (p. 69). But as

6) Perry Miller, *Nature's Nation* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1967), p. 206. Cecilia Tichi also says that Emerson and Thoreau shun the "confrontation with ideas of an actual New Earth." *New World, New Earth: Environmental Reform in American Literature from the Puritans through Whitman* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1979), p. 161.

7) *The Portable Thoreau*, ed. Carl Bode, The Viking Portable Library (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1975), pp. 610-11.

8) Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 3rd ed. (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1982), p. 88.

Miller and Bercovitch explain,⁹ we cannot dismiss the background of Puritanism with regard to Emerson. (Though, this matter is too big to be discussed here.)

Emerson gives his utmost consideration to the importance of nature and its relation to the soul of man. He thinks that it is necessary for his contemporaries to have a direct relation to nature for themselves:

Our age is retrospective. It builds the sepulchres of the fathers. It writes biographies, histories, and criticism. The foregoing generations beheld God and nature face to face; we, through their eyes. Why should not we also enjoy an original relation to the universe? (*Nature*, p. 7)

In order to establish the identity, Emerson asks for the key to nature, American nature (wilderness). It is due to this that he says: "the ancient precept, 'Know thyself,' and the modern precept, 'Study nature,' become at last one maxim" (*The American Scholar*, p. 56). Emerson places emphasis not only on the importance of nature but also on the potentiality of man.

How calmly and genially the mind apprehends one after another the laws of physics! What noble emotions dilate the mortal as he enters into the counsels of the creation, and feels by knowledge the privilege to BE! His insight refines him. The beauty of nature shines in his own breast. Man is greater that he can see this, and the universe less, because Time and Space relations vanish as laws are known. (*Nature*, p. 27)

His words remind us of the following words from Coleridge:

Man is unique because he surpasses Nature while remaining her greatest achievement. He fuses within himself the finite and the infinite, the physical and the spiritual. "For as the Ideal is realized in Nature, so is the Real idealized in man."¹⁰

9) Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1939), p. 213.
Bercovitch, p. 160.

5. Concluding remarks

Emerson intends to restore through reason the relations between nature and the soul of man. He wants to establish an original relation to nature, which is not under the yoke of past tradition. Bercovitch tells us the difference between American Romanticism and European Romanticism concerning the idea of nature:

Europeans of Lowell's day believed that the divinity in nature was in the spiritual eye of the beholder. The American made his sainthood visible by identifying the literal-spiritual contours of the land. For the European, nature might evoke the spiritual qualities in the viewer's mind, enlarge *his* soul, fill *him* with ideas commensurate with *his* deepest feelings. But in its historical reality, as the English or German landscape, nature remained part of his specific, concrete, and therefore limiting (if cherished) personal or national past and present. The American scene by definition transcended past and present.¹⁰⁾

We can conclude therefore that Emerson's idea of relations between nature and man forms one of the bases of American identity.

10) These are the words from one of Coleridge's letters, quoted from Craig W. Miller, "Coleridge's Concept of Nature" in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. XXV, No. 1 (1964), 96. While Emerson places emphasis on the potentiality of man, in his "Nature" a shadow seems to be cast on his belief in man:

Man is fallen; nature is erect, and serves as a differential thermometer, detecting the presence or absence of the divine sentiment in man. By fault of our dullness and selfishness, we are looking up to nature, but when we are convalescent, nature will look up to us. (p. 546)

11) Bercovitch, pp.151-52.